

measure of defence, on the part of an unarmed organisation, against those frequent acts of violence which bore crude testimony at this period to the feelings that were arising against churchmen. In modern society, when everyone, clerk and layman alike, is protected by the State with impartiality and vigour, it would be as unnecessary as it would be futile for any spiritual body to attempt to defend itself by spiritual weapons of its own forging. But in days when the police system was tardy and inefficient, when every corporation was expected to defend its own rights, and every individual his own head, when the curses of the Church still affected the lives and disturbed the imaginations of men, it was at once necessary and possible for the clergy to act in their own defence. The real grievance was this, that the Church defended all her privileges and all her possessions with equal ardour, irrespective of their justice or utility. She took advantage of a strong position to refuse every demand for redress; she adopted, towards all proposals of concession, the attitude of the French noblesse before the Revolution. Whether it was the villeins of Bury or St. Albans, or the citizens of Reading, demanding a new status at the hands of the monks, whether it was the King's Courts attempting to have clerics and Sanctuary men punished for their crimes, whether it was the laity complaining against the ruinous fees and heavy extortions of the spiritual courts, the Church was equally deaf in all questions where her own interests and her own income were concerned.

One privilege, typical of many others, illustrates the relations of clerics to other Englishmen. It is that which is known as the 'benefit of clergy.' It had been wrung from the great founder of the Plantagenet monarchy, during that brief but all-important revulsion of feeling which was caused by the murder of Becket. In that moment of triumph and enthusiasm, when everything that the murdered man had requested was claimed as by Divine right, the Church secured for herself this famous privilege, which many of her sons had in Becket's lifetime regarded as outrageous. Since that fatal day, long custom had made it an absolute right of every cleric to be exempted in cases of felony from the criminal law of the